

Love and Responsibility in relationships

### **Sunday 11/12/05 Ephesians ch5 v21- ch6 v9**

We have seen already in this series, with amazement, that as believers, God has chosen us, made us His children and given us His Spirit. We once were spiritually dead, w/o Him and w/o hope in this world... but now that has all changed. We have been saved by grace through faith, trusting in Jesus' blood being shed for us, and brought into God's Kingdom and Family as part of a people from every tribe and tongue and nation – part of a Temple of living stones under construction.

In that sense, becoming a believer is the most wonderful, important and glorious experience available for any man or woman. But it does not stop there.

Paul has prayed that, by His Holy Spirit, God would help us to know Him better... that the eyes of our hearts would be enlightened, that we would know His power, but above all that we would grow in our relationship with His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ... the One who stands at the door of our hearts and lives (as the Light of the world) and knocks – seeking to be let in... because then the Holy Spirit can get to work with us into making God's new society, a community developing and growing through the exercise of the grace gifts and ministries we have looked at... a people who have been converted and therefore are starting to live differently... a people who are fleeing from paganism and pursuing purity, a people who really are light in the darkness.

It is no surprise then that the foremost arena for working out such a change and for the demonstration of the Gospel / Good News is the Family Arena! It is often the hardest!

In marriages (ch5 v21-33)

Marriage is a great gift that has long been mocked, often because of the way human beings carry on... the C19th poet Coleridge observed ; “The most happy marriage I can imagine would be the union of a deaf man to a blind woman.” In a 1920's book P.G. Wodehouse wrote; “Chumps always make the best husbands. When you marry, Sally, grab a chump. Tap his forehead first... [to see if it rings] all the unhappy marriages come from the husbands having brains.”

Human beings can mock and sadly be mocked... but God's plan for marriage is very different. It is a creation design and blessing, a holy, faithful, one-flesh union only between a man and woman and intended for life. In the words of the BCP (echoing Ephesians ch5) it is “an honourable estate instituted of God in the time of man's innocency signifying unto us the mystical union betwixt Christ and His Church.”

It is a wonderful estate as there is a wonderful complementarity between man

and woman. It is a gift of God and a blessing... but often very much under attack because the devil hates it and stirs others up to hate it as well. Various atheistic revolutions have sought to abolish it, but without success, because it is the building block of a cohesive society.

What does Paul say in this famous passage? Well, in C1st terms, he is just as radical as Jesus. Here is some context...

William Barclay writes; "In Jewish law a woman was not a person, but a thing... in Greece, home and family life were near to being extinct, and fidelity was completely non-existent... the degeneracy in Rome was tragic... it is not too much to say that the whole atmosphere of the ancient world was adulterous." So, in what would have been the shattering context of mutual submission (v21) Paul speaks first to the wives; 22Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. 23For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. 24Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything.

He also adds in summary (v33); and the wife must respect her husband. Then he speaks to the husbands; 25Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her 26to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, 27and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. 28In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.

Again he adds in summary; 33However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself... You may not believe it, but this was and is radical stuff... Try it and see! It is Jesus' Golden Rule as applied to husbands "do to others what you would have them do to you" (or do as you would be done by). If this was lived out we would find ourselves in a different world!

The husband is called to be the wife's "self-forgetting servant" says Moule. The characteristic is not "lordship" says Stott, but "saviourhood." Jesus is the model. Male headship is clearly spoken of here, but it is seen in terms of role and responsibility, not to be used as an excuse to dominate, but to be expressed in service.

So, in Stott's words; "Whenever the husband's headship mirrors the headship of Christ, then the wife's submission... far from detracting from her womanhood, will positively enrich it... he will give himself for her, in order that she may develop her full potential under God and so become more completely herself."

He continues "So the submission and respect he asks of the wife express her response to his love and her desire that he too will become what God intends him to be in his 'leadership.' "

In this model, each have a free choice, and as believers in Moules's words are to be "Loved & loving" "Blessed and blessing." Women are not to submit to awful ogres and husbands are not to be doormats, neither must the opposite abuse happen. We must work hard at relating well. If only one spouse is a believer it can be very hard... it is harder still where there are separations and divorces... but often lives will then speak louder than words. Those of us who are married should do marriage M.O.T.'s and invest in our wives or husbands. (Marriage Course)

In family life (ch6 v1-4)

Family life is clearly related to husbands and wives. It is often said (rightly) that the most important relationship in the lives of children is the relationship between their parents. Yet family life and the experience of parenting, whilst containing moments of incredible joy and beauty can also drive many to their wits end and be tinged with deep pain. Yet the challenges of parenting and being parented are not new... Socrates wrote; "Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food, and tyrannize their teachers."

"As a rule" said Queen Victoria "children are a bitter disappointment – their greatest object being to do precisely what their parents do not wish and have anxiously tried to prevent." It is a sad comment as more recently is Gore Vidal's - "Never have children only grandchildren."

Paul has two clear directives. Firstly children are to obey their parents. This is clear, though the phrase "in the Lord" may give some leeway if obedience to the parents would mean disobedience to God. He invokes a Biblical blessing (Deuteronomy 5:16) from the Ten Commandments to underline his point; 2"Honor your father and mother"—which is the first commandment with a promise— 3"that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth."

It is clear, but it is not all. He goes on secondly...

4Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.

We see him having the same approach as Jesus who said; "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them." (Mark 10:14) Stott writes; "Every child must be allowed to be him/herself."

"They are little people in their own right... on no account to be exploited, manipulated or crushed." "Let them be fondly cherished" wrote Calvin, "deal gently with them."

It is what children need, but it is not always easy to get the balance right, or to get the message across clearly that we love our children as we struggle to teach them to obey. I am reading a book at the moment called, "Getting out of your kid's faces and into their hearts." In it Valerie Bell writes; "Paul couples

admonition with nurture. Raising children was never meant to be divorced from the softening influence of nurture.”

She goes on (and this is as far as I have got) “Our children need us to be the guardians of the trust, the protectors of family relationships, parents with clear focus, and pure hearts. They need us to have faithful hearts – to care deeply, passionately, and affectionately for them.”

After all, I found myself reflecting, isn't that how God cares for us – His adult children?

(Father's & Mother's beware of exasperating your children.)

In the world of work (ch6 v5-9)

Finally let us look briefly at this economic relationship - that also hugely affects the home. The Christian Gospel has come under some misguided criticism for not being more against slavery.

However Moule writes; “The Gospel found slavery in the world... [and] began at once to undermine it, with its mighty principles of the equality of all souls.” (I must add something quite absent outside the Gospel) He continues “one of the fairest fruits of primeval Christianity... was the brotherhood manifestly established between Christian masters and their slaves.”

Paul tells slaves to obey and serve their earthly masters. He writes; 6Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. 7Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men...” They are words that can be easily translated to the world of work today and have often led to success in enterprising businesses.

They are, in some ways radical – certainly in a moaning or work-shy culture – but look at what is said to masters (or employers today).

9And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.

How could it be that the Christian master would not see that a major way of serving his slave would be to set the slave free? How could it be that the Christian employer would not see that he or she has to take their employees needs seriously and provide for them fairly?

Just as the Christian Gospel is behind women's rights, so it is behind children's rights, and worker's rights. These 'rights' did not appear on their own, they are God-given and they do not exist on their own, but alongside equally God-given responsibilities.

Husbands and wives have responsibilities to each other and to their children.

Children also have responsibilities to their parents. Employers have responsibilities to their employees and employees to their employers.